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CPL. DEMPSTER'S REPORT

Excerpts from:

Cpl. Dempster's Report of finding Insp. Fitzgerald's "Lost Patrol".

From the Sessional Papers of the Parliament of Canada (1912) VOL. XLVI

No. 20 R.N.W.M.P.

Royal Northwest Mounted Police,
Dawson, Y.T., April 17, 1911.

"B" Division.

The Officer Commanding,

"B" Division, R.N.M. Police,
Dawson, Y.T.

Sir, - I have the honour to submit the following as my report of the Dawson-McPherson Relief Patrol, of which I was in charge ...

I left Dawson at 1 p.m. on February 28, accompanied by Reg. No. 4937, Const. Fyfe, J.F., ex-Const. F. Turner and Indian Charles Stewart, with three dog teams of five dogs each

On March 12, we struck an old trail on the Little Wind river, about 12 or 15 miles from its mouth. We could only see this trail in places over the bars, as the river was flooding and obliterating it. We could pick it up in places between this point and the mouth of the river. I could not determine whether this was Inspector Fitzgerald's trail or not, as it was possible it might have been an old Indian trail. I figured that if this was Inspector Fitzgerald's trail he must have turned back ...

March 18 - 12 above, cloudy; started at 7.40 a.m. Trail up the Caribou very heavy, river very crooked and heads nor-nor' west. Went up to near a large lake and turned to right and started over divide; there is no big hill. Leaving Caribou river we travelled nor' east by nor' the greater part of the time, then kept a little more to north. Had great difficulty in finding trail. This section of country new to all of us. It has been up and down hill all afternoon. The country covered with small spruce. Made Trail river at 5.45 p.m., and camped at 6.30 p.m. Hard day; dogs and men very tired. Think route we followed to-day much longer than going over the mountain.

March 19 - 15 below, cloudy; snowing all afternoon. Started at 7.40 a.m. Trail down Trail river very heavy; camped at 5.15 p.m.; about 5 miles from Peel river.

March 20 - 13 below, clear; started 7.40 a.m.; trail heavy most of the day. Made Colin's cabin and camped at 6.15 p.m. Found two packages in cabin, one apparently mail and other containing dispatch bag marked R.N.W.M.P. Evidently cached hereby Insp. Fitzgerald to lighten up his load.

March 21 - 25 below, cloudy a.m., clear in p.m. Reached portage at 10 a.m., at 11.45 a.m. found tent, tent poles, and stove alongside trail in the middle of a lake. Reached Peel river again at 2.15 p.m. At 3 p.m. about two or three miles below portage found a toboggan and two sets of dog harness. All ground lashings had been cut off. Trail led into bush and on following it we found bodies of two of Fitzgerald's party, one, that of Constable Kinney whom I knew, and the other I concluded to be that of Constable Taylor. The latter had evidently committed suicide by shooting the top of his head off. Evidently starved to death. Found camp kettle half full of moose hide cut in small pieces which had been boiled for a stew. Camped at 5.45 p.m. Covered bodies before we left them to proceed on our journey .

March 22 - 23 below, cloudy, cold, raw wind from nor'west. Started at 7.25 a.m. At 8.30 I found an indistinct trail leading to the bank. While feeling for trail at the foot of bank found a pair of snowshoes. Climbed bank, which was a high cut bank, and on going into the bush a little way found bodies of Inspector Fitzgerald and ex-Constable S. Carter. Latter had evidently died first, as he had been laid out, hands crossed over breast and face covered with handkerchief. He was lying on his back. Inspector Fitzgerald was lying on his back on the spot where there had formerly been a fire. Body partially covered by two half blankets. A blunt axe with a broken handle were lying near; there had been a good deal of tramping around as though getting firewood. Covered bodies with brush and proceeded on our way and arrived at McPherson at 6 p.m., and notified Corporal Somers and Constable Blake of the fatalities.

March 27 - Getting out supplies for return trip; loaded toboggans for early start. Assisted Corporal Somer preparing coffins and bodies for burial.

March 28 - Funeral of Inspector Fitzgerald, Constables Kinney and Taylor and ex-Constable Carter at 3 p.m.

March 29 - Corporal Somers making out reports, etc., and did not get ready for me to pull out until about 3 p.m., and as it was very stormy we did not start to-day.

March 30. - Left at 7.30 a.m., for return to Dawson

Pg.297 In conclusion, I feel called on to make the following remarks. I saw the list of provisions at McPherson which the ill-fated party took with them, and was much surprised at the small quantities taken; in fact, I feel certain that the party must have been on short rations long before they turned back.

Under the best possible conditions, without any delay of any kind, I do not think the party had sufficient rations to last them from McPherson to Dawson, but if they had kept on the right trail they would have got through all right, as they would have met with several bands of Indians from whom they could have purchased ample supplies of dried meat, fish, etc.

As to their dogs I can say nothing, as all the information I could gather at McPherson was that they were in fair condition. The Indian Esau, employed by Inspector Fitzgerald, was only employed to guide them over the Big Portage, and was then discharged.

At McPherson, a will was found on Inspector Fitzgerald's body, which had evidently been written with a burnt stick of wood a very short time before death. Corpl. Somers will collect and pack up the effects of each of the unfortunate men, and have same in readiness to send to Regina when the steamer calls on the opening of navigation....

I wish to draw your attention to the splendid manner in which Constable Fyfe, ex-Constable Turner and Indian Stewart performed their work. I have been over this patrol several times, but I think this trip was the hardest I ever made, and certainly it was the most disagreeable. The men worked with a will, and gave me every possible assistance.

I have the honour to be, sir,

Your obedient servant,

(Sd.) W.J.D. DEMPSTER, Corpl.,

Reg. No.3193,

In charge of Relief Patrol.

Background on Loucheux Indians (also called Kutchin, old spelling "Kuttchin")

Small bands of Loucheux roamed areas now crossed by the Dempster highway, living mainly on caribou and fish. They knew the best routes for crossing from the Yukon to Mackenzie River basins and acted as guides for the European explorers, fur traders and missionaries. The "Lost Patrol" of the RNMWP met a tragic fate in 1911 after they dismissed their Indian guide too soon. Cpl. Dempster's famous patrol, which found their frozen bodies, relied on a Loucheux guide, Charlie Stewart.

Emile Petitot (1838-1916) was an Oblate missionary from France to Northwest Canada in the late 19th century. Here are some of his observations about the life and travels of the Loucheux:

"...on their territory, the Loucheux were scattered in bands of five or six families living together in spherical tents made of reindeer¹ skins." (p. 117)

"The Rhâne-Kuttchin, after hunting the argali² and the bighorn on the Tdha-tséin or Rockies, come down to the banks of the Tsé-ondjig after the break-up, build rafts which they load with furs and provisions, and float down that river up to Fort Yukon, with their families. Once they have finished their trading, they cross over to the right bank, where they leave their heavy and unwieldy craft, and go out to pass the summer on the ridges of the Tdha-tcha whence they repair to the Tdha-tséin come snow time." (p. 113)

"They make themselves boats covered with reindeer hides, but they have no canoes because of the total lack of birch trees in the mountains. As a substitute they use cawn, triangular rafts the tops of which are provided with a kind of flooring surrounded by a rough guard-rail." (p. 109)

1. ie. caribou

2. wild sheep

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Loucheux (cont.)

"Their rafts, (phaôn), which means "drifting" (from phâne, river), are made of whole trees laced next to one another with strips of willow, in such a way that all the three tops are joined at one end and all the trunks at the other. This forms large isosceles triangles whose bases, much heavier than the apex, always float forward downstream. This type of construction prevents the phaôns from spinning or from grounding on the shallows. Across this first layer, the Dindjié put a few trimmed trunks acting as a stringer and on which they lay a second layer identical to the first, but surrounded by a rough guard-rail. Two big oars, roughly adzed, propel the heavy machine forward whenever the current lags. Some of the Loucheux build themselves some tiny high-floating rhâons, on which they sit." (p. 109-110)

(Excerpts from Donat Savoie, ed, (1970) The Amerindians of the Canadian North-West in the 19th Century, as seen by Emile Petitot. Volume II: The Loucheux Indians. DIAND, published under the authority of the Hon. Jean Chrétien, Minister.)

Richard Slobodin lived among the Peel River Kutchin in 1938-39 and 1946-47.

Dr. Slobodin, now Professor of Anthropology at McMaster University in

Hamilton, Ont., is regarded as their leading ethnographer. He wrote about their traditional life:

"Travel, the great necessity and the great preoccupation of northern people, is possible summer and winter. It is easier and on the whole pleasanter in winter by dog-team, interrupted only by occasional severe storms. In summer, travel by various types of water craft or on foot across country, usually with pack-dogs, is feasible but relatively arduous.

"There are two periods during the year, however, when active travel, which is a principal feature of northern life, is brought almost to a standstill. These are the periods of break-up, from mid-April until the end of May, and of freeze-up, from late September to early November. During these periods neither clear water nor firm ice is to be found. Travel by boat, by dogteam, and, in recent decades, by airplane is interrupted by these seasonal changes. As with all circumboreal peoples, these yearly transitional periods mark a swing from one major seasonal complex of activities to another.

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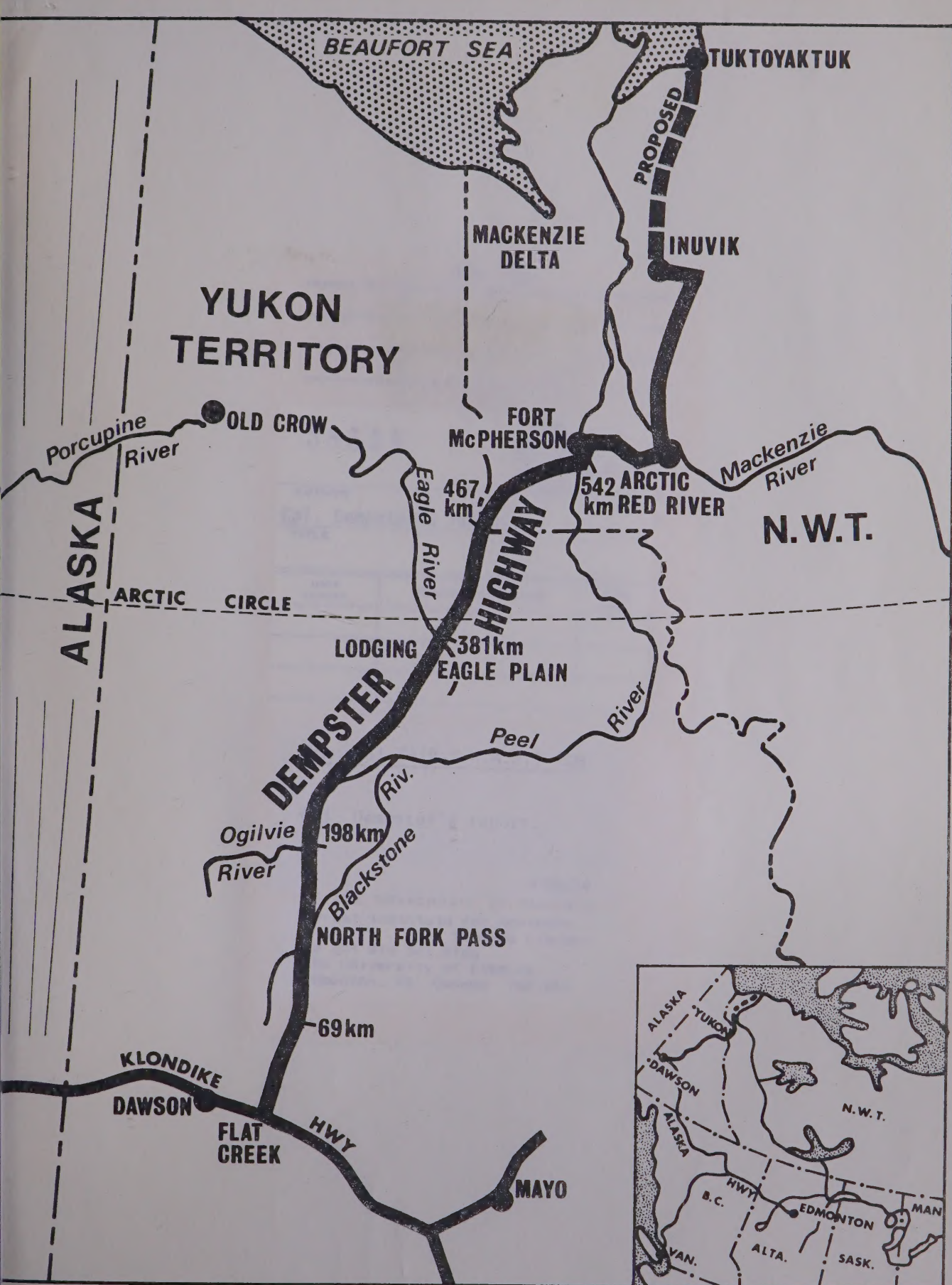
Loucheux (Cont.)

"Throughout their known history, the Peel River Kutchin have lived by hunting, trapping, and freshwater fishing. Land and water life is fairly abundant. Mammals important for food are caribou--of paramount importance--and also moose, muskrat, beaver, snowshoe rabbit (or Arctic hare), and, occasionally, mountain sheep, brown bear, and porcupine. The fur animals taken in this region are muskrat, beaver, rabbit, mink, marten, lynx, wolf, wolverine, Arctic or ermine weasel, otter, fisher, and several colour variations of fox. The fur-bearing carnivores depend upon fish and rodents, principally mice, voles, and shrews. The Peel River people are aware of the roles played by these and other organisms in the dynamics of the local ecology.

"Many waterfowl migrate to the region for spring nesting. These include species of duck, goose, and swan. Of indigenous birds the only edible species is the Ptarmigan. Important in oral tradition, however, are the Snowy Owl and the Northern Raven.

"Fish found within the Peel drainage include lake trout, grayling, louche (freshwater ling), great northern pike, and such migrant marine types as whitefish and herring in several species, Arctic char, and inconnu. The salmon is rare in the Arctic drainage, of which the Peel area forms a part, but it is well known to most Peel River people from their experiences on the Yukon."

(Excerpts from Richard Slobodin (1962), "Band Organization of the Peel River Kutchin". National Museum of Canada Bulletin No. 179. Issued under the authority of the Honourable Walter Dinsdale P.C., M.P. Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources, page 9-10.)



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